

# UC Berkeley

## TRANSIT

**Title**

A Fine Self-Deception

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4kv4g3qv>

**Journal**

TRANSIT, 4(1)

**Author**

de Weck, Roger

**Publication Date**

2008-11-26

**DOI**

10.5070/T741009726

Peer reviewed

People and cultures have a tendency for selective memory. They forget much of what they've done or undergone. They hold onto the convenient, embellish the mediocre, and eliminate whatever tarnishes their self-perception. America usually ignores the genocide of the Native Americans. The French are virtuosos of repression: Charles de Gaulle managed to erase both the collaboration with the Nazis in the Second World War and the French atrocities in the Algerian War from the collective consciousness. For the Austrians, Ludwig van Beethoven, born in Bonn, is an Austrian, and the man from Braunau, Adolf Hitler, is more of a German.

Switzerland is no exception in this regard. Only under pressure and with a half-century delay did the Confederation recognize the fact that it was no nation of heroes in the Second World War (and comfort itself that it was just as little a rogue nation).

The Swiss have also forgotten that one of the co-founders of modern Switzerland was none other than Napoleon. The First Consul of the Republic, soon to be Emperor, arbitrated between the constantly squabbling Helvetians he had ordered to Paris. With the so-called Act of Mediation of February 1803, which in reality was a directive "in the name of the French people," he gave to the chaotic Swiss a system of government that largely has continued to this day.

In short, modern Switzerland was a Napoleonic dictate. Equality for the formerly tributary regions of St. Gallen, Thurgau, Aargau, Tessin and Waadt was a gift from Bonaparte. The formal name "Swiss Confederation" was a compromise decreed by the Frenchman between the guardians of the old "Confederation" and the modernist proponents of the young "Switzerland."

The land first ruled by Napoleon and then occupied by those who defeated him did not achieve its autonomy by its own power, according to Ulrich Im Hof's *Geschichte der Schweiz*. Our independence was a favor of the European sovereigns and a product of their rivalry: no

major power wanted to give control of the Alpine passes to any other. So we remained a buffer zone. We were neutral even before we knew it.

For this reason, Switzerland was allowed to exist when the Congress of Vienna reorganized Europe after Napoleon's defeat, and for this reason Switzerland was to kindly remain neutral, thank you very much. This is the manner in which, on March 20, 1815 in Vienna, the new principle of "eternal neutrality" was established: It was not a Swiss stroke of genius, not an inherited saying from Switzerland's patron saint, Niklaus von der Flüe, but a decision of reactionary monarchs. And a few weeks later, the Swiss themselves became the first people to break the neutrality: When Napoleon seized power again during the "Hundred Days" preceding Waterloo, Switzerland took part in the "crusade" against the emperor. Troops marched toward the French city of Besançon.

Our William Tell legend of independence and our cliché of neutrality are fine self-deceptions. After all, the Swiss first made Tell their great hero when they rediscovered him in the famous play of the German writer Friedrich Schiller – at a time when the homeland was a protectorate of France.

In every land there is a difference between history and conception of history. The conception is more pleasing, the history more illuminating.